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Participatory Women Empowerment: Increased Rural Agricultural Productivity toward Sustainable Development in Kenya

¹Dr. Mary Mogute, ²Julius M. Limbitu,

¹Senior Lecturer,
Daystar University.
Mobile: 0722219521

²Lecturer,
Daystar University.
Mobile: 0713727527

Email: jlimbitu@daystar.ac.ke

Corresponding Author: Email: mmogute@daystar.ac.ke

Abstract

Participation of all rural community members is important in promoting agricultural productivity toward sustainable development. Women empowerment is necessary to enable them participate in promoting increased agricultural productivity and sustainable food security. Empowered women have equal control of decision making, taking responsibility, holding different social actors accountable, having access to resources for food production, and control over agricultural produce to improve the welfare of the household and community members. However, rural women mostly face disempowering forces from the dominant paternalistic indigenous African culture. The study used desktop research method to assess the dynamics of participatory empowerment of rural women to increase agricultural productivity in the theoretical basis of gender and sustainable development in Kenya. The study found that women in rural areas work very hard in the labor intensive agricultural production, but have very low control over how the crop produce is utilized. Men tend to dominate decision making about the agricultural produce, mostly characterized by selling food produce soon after harvesting. This leaves the household without enough food to last until the next crop is harvested. The conclusion was that there was need for community education through rights-based approach to overcome the socio-cultural challenges of indigenous paternalistic culture common in the rural communities, and achieve gender integration in sustainable development. The study recommended further research and action that could empower rural women to participate in increasing agricultural productivity with gender equality. Rural women need to be enabled to take active role in determining the appropriate utilization of the crop produce to improve the well being of rural vulnerable households toward sustainable development.

Key terms: Women Empowerment, Participatory, Gender Integration, Poverty, Sustainable Development.

1. Introduction

Participation of all rural community members is important in promoting agricultural productivity towards sustainable development. Since women are key players in agricultural production, their empowerment is necessary in promoting increased agricultural productivity and sustainable food security. Empowered women have equal control of decision making, taking responsibility, holding different social actors accountable, having access to resources for food production, and control over agricultural produce that improve welfare of households and community members (Alsop, Bertelsen & Holland, 2006; Donnelley, 2007).

1.1 Problem Statement of the study

Women provide the largest share of human resource in the labor intensive agricultural food production within rural communities in Kenya (Alila & Atieno, 2006). However, rural women mostly face disempowering forces that disfranchise them from the dominant paternalistic indigenous African way of life that control food production and control. Hence, their contribution is constrained and suffocated by these systems. This consequently leaves them dependent upon their male counterparts who are dominant players in decision-making processes and control of agricultural produce (March, Smyth & Mukhopadhyay, 1999; Chambers 2004).

1.2 Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to: study the role of women in agricultural food production; investigate women empowerment trends among households in rural areas; explore effects of food productivity on the socio-economic status of

rural communities in Kenya and examine possible strategies of empowering women in rural communities to enhance agricultural production and food security.

2. Theoretical background and related literature of the study

Participatory rural women empowerment in rural communities is essential for the attainment of food security and sustainable development in any society. Empowerment is a process of transforming community members, especially women to take greater control of their lives and their environment. Most of the agrarian rural communities live on small pieces of land where they grow crops and keep livestock that are hardly enough to meet their basic needs. Hulse (2007) cited the Brutland's report defined sustainable development as the process of exploiting natural resources to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Hence, women empowerment in rural communities is essential because climate change has caused unprecedented global temperature and seasonal changes characterized by droughts and floods during dry and rainy seasons respectively. World climate change has affected agricultural productivity and the livelihoods of the poor masses. Food insecurity has led to malnutrition, reduced body immunity, and a general decline of people's health status (Wright, 2005). Most affected by this trend are women and children (Miller, 2007).

Africa has had the world's highest rate of population growth and the sharpest decline of per capita food production over the last

decades. There has been continuous loss of soil fertility, increase of desertification, shortage of water and limited access to farm inputs. Agricultural productivity has been facing a continuous cycle of potential harmful effects on the environment, and declining household socio-economic status, and human health. Food insecurity has led to chronic hunger among members of the rural communities who rely on unpredictable seasonal rains. The most affected groups of the rural poor are women and children (Miller, 2007).

The rural populations in the East African region get their food from subsistence farming which is mainly produced by women. However, in the past, these yields have been poor leading to looming food insecurity at household levels. This has led to food imports from other countries which are barely enough to satisfy household demands. This has also exaggerated trade imbalance that affects foreign exchange and the rate of socio-economic growth and development. In Kenya, the priority of most rural people, especially women in poor households, has been and still is to produce enough food for family members (Mudgal, 2006; Yousif, 2006). In spite of this, their efforts have been marred with a number of challenges that jeopardize their full potential. Therefore, empowering women in rural communities to actively participate in food production of high quality and quantity is vital since agricultural crops are the basic sources of human food and women provide up to 70% of the agricultural labor force in this sector.

In most developing economies, majority of labor force is involved in farming activities to support their livelihoods. But, in some

African countries like Burkina Faso, Burundi, Kenya, and Tanzania, the labor force involved in agriculture has been declining, as their economies turn into commercial industrialism (Knox, 2007). According to Kinoti and Kimuyu (1997) about 80% of the population in East African countries live in rural areas and largely depend on agricultural activities. Empowering women in rural communities has a great potential in promoting Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the developing countries, thus promoting sustainable community development. In Kenya, more than 80 percent of the rural population is engaged in subsistence agriculture and they need to be empowered in order to improve their crop productivity toward sustainable community development (Oparanya, 2009). Knox (2007) defined agriculture as the growing of crops and the tending of livestock, either for subsistence or for trade. Historically, agricultural activities replaced hunting and gathering of wild fruits in supporting livelihoods. Agriculture has evolved into the most widespread economic activity found in all world regions where environmental circumstances like rain seasons, moisture, temperature and productive soils permit (Getis, 2008). Historical development of rural communities have led to transformation of agriculture in stages that have been classified on the basis of; providing household food, off-farm sales and level of farming equipments and mechanized used in agriculture. However, most rural poor, especially women use traditional methods of farming on small pieces of land to grow crops that are hardly enough for household consumption. This has led to a continuous

cycle of under nutrition and food insecurity, physical body weakness, inability to work hard in the farm, low productivity, and chronic poverty. In order for women in rural communities in Kenya to fully participate and engage in meaningful agricultural production, they need to be empowered to increase agricultural food production (Knox & Marston, 2007).

3. Methodology of the study

The study used desktop research method to assess the dynamics of participatory empowerment of rural women to increase agricultural productivity in the theoretical basis of gender and sustainable development in Kenya. The available findings of research information in related theme of empowering rural women for increased agricultural food production toward sustainable community development were used to inform the study and to form basis of conclusions and recommendations. The library and online sources of information were used to inform the study, where online sources were searched and accessed using the above key terms.

4. Study Findings

This section presents documented research findings on the participatory empowerment of rural women for increased agricultural food production toward sustainable community development. Data was reviewed and presented according to the objectives of the study as follows:

4.1 The role of women in agricultural production

When women in rural communities use hoe to cultivate, it needs more energy and time.

They are forced to plant crops long after the onset of the rain season because decision-making processes rest in the hands of men. In cases where there is shortage of rainfall, their crops dry prematurely, leading to food shortage and starvation. This aggravates food insecurity and poverty at household levels. Gillespie, Ruel, and Braun (2008) observe that agriculture is the primary source of livelihoods for the majority of the world's poor people, especially women in rural communities. Women are in turn the most vulnerable to health problems related to nutrition. Agriculture produces healthy balanced diet for healthy and strong people who are able to work hard in farming activities. However, this is not always the case because majority of the women in rural communities rely on the unpredictable seasonal rains. During long dry spells, they are vulnerable to starvation as they are unable to get enough balanced diets needed for a healthy living. Alternatively, during floods, women who live in rural communities with poor drainage systems have all their crops damaged leading to food shortage (Hulse, 2007).

Therefore, interactions between agricultural food and health are in such a way that agriculture affects health, and health affects agriculture. According to Gillespie and Braum (2008), agriculture influences the world's major health issues, including under-nutrition, especially among women and children under five years of age. Efforts to empower women in rural communities can contribute to the alleviation of these nutritional related health problems. On the other hand, the occurrences of these health conditions have serious effects on agricultural productivity among women in

rural communities, thus negating sustainable development efforts. This situation reduces income, perpetuates downward spiral into ill health and poverty, and further aggravates food insecurity and economic underdevelopment for the wider population. High prevalence of malnutrition and disease reduce people's purchasing power as they spend more of their limited income on medical costs. Therefore, enhanced food security policies and strategies could benefit agriculture by protecting women in rural communities against losses related to climate change challenges (Kalungu, 2014). Gillespie and Braun (2008) go on to suggest that, to improve agricultural productivity, truly collaborative, multi-sectoral, and interdisciplinary approaches are necessary. Challenging sectoral barriers that pose disincentives to collaboration need to be resolved, and challenges in trans-disciplinary analyses and communications confronted. Inter-sectoral cohesiveness in empowering farmers to enable them to participate in sustainable development efforts is a matter of practical process, and not an end in itself. Therefore, there is need for policy frameworks that create enabling environment, effective institutional arrangements, and the capacity of women in rural communities to participate in development efforts. Women in rural communities need to be empowered with knowledge and skills about improved farming practices needed for increased crop productivity and food security and environmental protection critical for sustainable development (Vargas, 2000).

4.2 Empowering women farmers for increased food security among rural communities in Kenya

The term community may refer to a group of people sharing common context, interests, and geographical location. A community is made up of families. Each family, and indeed each community, has got some physical and human resources that can be invested to gain profit and develop continuously. This is the process of rural community capital investment for sustainable development where all household members play a role in improving agricultural productivity. According to Helling, Serrano and Warren (2005), community participation in development efforts is very important in addressing challenges of sustainable development. Both the poor and the non-poor need to be accountable for actions and non-actions that affect their environment and the resultant potential for agricultural productivity. The poor, especially women, need to be empowered, through sensitization processes to become responsible stewards of their environment for increased food production. This includes being able to hold the non-poor accountable of their actions and non-actions that degrade the environment and negatively affect agricultural productivity (Ibid).

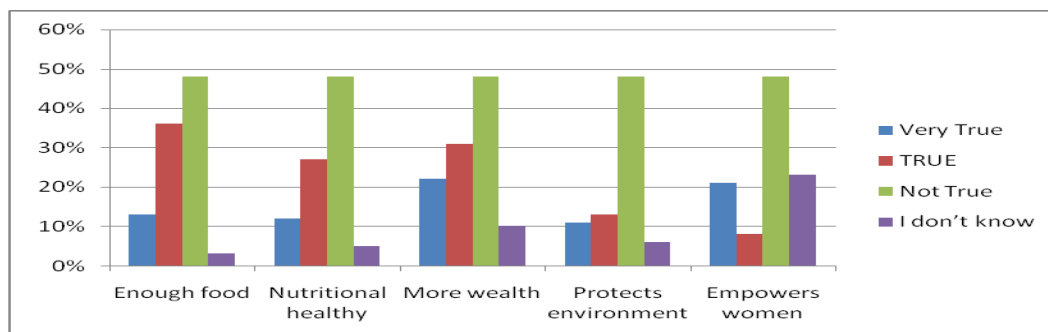
Myers (1999b) noted that community participation is dependent upon people's perceptions that determine their bias, prejudice, and historic cultural inclinations. This affects both the external community leaders of empowerment, and the local community members, including women. Community participation in development process is defined differently by different

people according to their goals and contexts. On the first extreme, participation is perceived as the passive process of receiving benefits from agricultural development institutions. On the second extreme, it is viewed as the complete ownership of agricultural production efforts by the local community. The latter is the type of empowerment needed for rural women engaged in agricultural production in rural communities however, this is seldom done and this weakens the process of empowerment (Donnelley, 2007).

4.3 Effects of food productivity on the socio-economic status of rural communities in Kenya

The third objective of the study set to explore the effects of food productivity on the social and economic status of farmers in the rural communities. The economic aspect of effects of food productivity includes market income after selling crop produce and the standard of living among people in rural communities in Kenya. Limbitu (2011) in a study entitled 'empowering subsistence farmers toward sustainable development' asked the respondents what the thought were the effects of food productivity on the socio-economic status of people in rural communities and the findings generated are presented in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1: Effects of food productivity on social and economic status of households in rural communities



Source: Limbitu, 2011.

The above data shows that 13 percent of the informants revealed that it was very true that producing enough agricultural food had effects on social and economic status of rural households, while 36 percent of them said it was true. That means a total of 49 percent of the respondents said that the capacity of food productivity had an impact on the social and economic well-being of the people in rural communities in Kenya echoing the findings by Mulwa (2010).

According to the above bar-graph, 56 percent of the respondents said that

available food was not enough for nutritional healthy living. On the other hand, 37 percent of the respondents said that crop productivity among women in rural communities did not contribute towards the increase of market income, for social and economic development. This means that there was a great potential of improving the capacity of food production among people, especially women in rural communities toward sustainable socio-economic development in Kenya. This concurs with what Mudgal (2006) who

found that the socio-economic well-being among people in rural communities depended on their ability to harvest enough food to feed their households throughout the year. There was need to empower people in rural communities to overcome challenges of climate change and produce enough food for their households throughout the year as argued by Thomas and Thomas (2007). The multi-stakeholder response to this need is necessary because food insecurity during disasters of droughts aggravates extreme poverty and impacts negatively on the efforts to achieve the

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across the sectors.

4.4 Possible strategies of empowering women in rural communities to protect the environment

According to Limbitu (2011), the informants were responding to the question: “how frequent are the following measures applied to empower women for improved agricultural production in rural communities?” The respondents generated the responses outlined in Table 4.1

Table 4.1 possible Strategies of empowering women in rural communities

Strategy/Rating	Very Often	Often	Rarely	I don't know
Capacity building	21%	39%	31%	9%
Subsidies	15%	46%	15%	24%
Policy guide	14%	18%	51%	17%
Market creation	9%	6%	72%	13%
Decision making power	5%	5%	69%	21%

Source: (Limbitu, 2011)

According to the above data, 21 percent of the informants considered capacity building strategy of empowering women to have been applied very often, 39% said it was often applied, 31% said it was rarely applied and 9% said they did not know about it. This means a total of about 60% of the respondents were of the view that capacity building training was used to empower rural women to increase agricultural food productivity. This finding corroborates with Wright (2005) advocated the importance of capacity building among women farmers to facilitate their understanding that the use of fertilizers, especially, nitrogen could reduce the organic content of the soil leading to

desertification and low capacity of land to support crop production. Wright (2005) found it necessary to empower women to understand that the nitrogen chemical from chemical fertilizers could drain into domestic water sources and pollute water with high nitrogen content harmful for human consumption. On the contrary, Wright (2005) argues that women could be empowered to use organic manure readily available in their cow-sheds and garbage heaps for farming while they use the money they currently use to buy fertilizers in meeting other household needs.

Hence, capacity building training on cost effective means of improving crop production like use of organic manure for

organic farming are important in promoting food security and environmental protection towards sustainable development (Yousif, 2006).

Limbitu (2011) further found out that 69% of the sampled respondents said that provision of policy guidelines in empowering women to increase agricultural productivity was rarely used or if used, most of the respondents did not know about it. This implies there was an opportunity of empowering women in rural communities by providing policy guidelines that could promote them to embrace better farming practices in order to improve crop productivity and protect the environment towards sustainable development as opinioned by Bishop-Shambrook (2005).

According to Narayan, (2002), establishing ready market for crops produced by household members in the rural communities was equally a vital necessity. When asked if there were strategies in place that worked towards improving markets accessibility for agricultural products, 72% of the respondents reported that such strategies were not known to them and if any, they were rarely used. This means that surplus food crops women in rural communities produced did not have a ready market. This further aggravated poverty levels because surplus produces was not translated into economic benefits for the people. Therefore, as (Kalungu, 2014) argues, there is need for accessible markets for farmers to sell their surplus agricultural products.

Limbitu (2011) also found out that farm inputs were very important in improving crop productivity. When respondents were

asked if they were often given subsidies on farm inputs, 46% of the respondents said “yes” they were. This corroborates with the findings by Alila and Atieno (2006) that found that the government of Kenya and other development stakeholders employed the issuance of subsidies on farm inputs as a means of empowering women in rural communities and ultimately improve general agricultural productivity to enhance sustainable development in Kenya.

In a study by Kalungu, (2014) different strategies were proposed as critical in empowering women in rural households to increase agricultural production. Two strategies; capacity building and provision of agricultural subsidies to farmers were reported by most respondents. However, strategies related to policy formulations and guideline implementation such as promoting of irrigation-based agriculture, market creation and removal of middle men who exploit and take advantage of poor farmers, and empowerment of women to make independent decisions in agricultural production were rarely utilized. Hence, to promote women’s empowerment in agricultural production geared towards food security and environmental protection, it is critical to effectively popularize and utilize these strategies that have not been effectively utilized in the past.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper established that women in rural communities work very hard in labor intensive agricultural production, but have very low control over how crop yields are utilized. Men dominate decision making processes with regard to agricultural produce, mostly characterized by selling

food produce soon after harvesting and controlling all the benefits accrued from these sales. Weather patterns and climatic changes were also found to affect household food security. This led to frequent food shortages that increased nutritional-related health problems among women and children in rural communities. There was need for community education through rights-based approach to empowerment to overcome socio-cultural challenges of indigenous paternalistic culture common in most rural communities to achieve gender integration in sustainable development through the processes of mutual decision-making, participation and control of processes related to agricultural production and environmental protection. This paper also established that decline in food productivity leads to decline in the

social and economic well-being of the women in rural communities in Kenya.

The study recommended further research and action that could empower rural women to meaningfully and actively participate in increasing agricultural productivity, food security and environmental protection. Women need to be enabled to take active role in determining appropriate utilization of crop produce to improve the well being of rural vulnerable households, a key strategy to sustainable development. The study also pointed out the need to expand irrigation-based agriculture instead of depending on the traditional rain-fed agriculture given the unpredictable nature of weather patterns and extensive climatic changes experiences globally.

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